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SUBJECT: THE FIRST LADY'S VISIT TO JORDAN, MAY 20-21

1.Summary. First Lady Laura Bush's engagements at the World Economic Forum (WEF) and participation in civil society events underlined the U.S. commitment to supporting educational reform and women's empowerment as the basis for freedom in the region. Her meetings with a wide range of Jordanians and other Arabs, from the King and Queen to students, social activists and a small-businesswoman who benefited from a USAID micro-credit loan, emphasized the U.S. support for reform that benefits all elements of society. At Mt. Nebo, a monument to Moses and the three monotheistic religions, she highlighted U.S. respect for religious beliefs. Mrs. Bush's engagement in the WEF and her messages were widely covered in the local, regional and international news media. End Summary.

2.The WEF Plenary: "Springtime of Hope"

In her plenary speech, Mrs. Bush hailed examples of women's gains: from the right to vote and run for office in Kuwait, to the high rate of women's participation in the Afghan elections - a message echoed by other WEF speakers and widely reported in the local and international press. She also underscored the role of education and literacy in promoting freedom and stability and announced the launching of an early reader program, "My Arabic Library," funded under the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). Likewise, the First Lady stressed U.S. support for educational improvements in the region, for example through thousands of new micro-scholarships for high school students to learn English. She mentioned several Jordanian women as examples of women's empowerment, and later met with a woman who lifted her family from poverty through a USAID-funded loan.

3. Discussion with Arab Youth

Following a bilateral meeting with the King and Queen, the First Lady participated in a dialogue with 14 Arab university students, attended by the King and Queen and moderated by Finance Minister Bassem Awadallah. The students underlined the importance of education and equal opportunity regardless of political or family connections. They also highlighted the need for entrepreneurship and women's empowerment as forces for regional reform. A Palestinian from Bir Zeit University described the security and economic obstacles hampering many Palestinian students and called on the U.S. to help Palestinians reform their educational and political systems and to gain their rights. Mrs. Bush reiterated the President's commitment to two democratic states, Israeli and Palestinian, living side by side in peace. She also saluted the student's passion and idealism, a message she repeated in an interview with Jordan TV right after the meeting with the Arab students. An Iraqi student appealed to the U.S. for help in creating a safe and secure environment, and complained about U.S. military raids and arrests on university campuses.

4. Lunch with Women Activists

At a lunch with six women activists, arranged by the Embassy and moderated by the Charge, Mrs. Bush explored the conservative attitudes and other obstacles that are hampering women's empowerment. As an example, the activists -- who included NGO heads, a journalist and a judge-- pointed to conservative attitudes of many of the male and even the six female members of parliament, who failed to support legislation to strengthen women's rights. The author of the Jordan section in Freedom's House's recent survey said that the study found that women in the region, including Jordan, are at a profound disadvantage in practically every institution in society: the

criminal justice system, the economy, education, health care, and the media. The education system is also deficient, according to the activists, and teachers are not adequately trained to convey modern messages on gender equality. School textbooks are an important problem as they provide the message that the only career path open for women is in the home. The activists called for legal reform, more business opportunities, and professional training as the means of advancing their goals. They expressed their deep appreciation for the First Lady's empathy and support.

[15. Visit to the Discovery School](#)

Accompanied by Queen Rania and Education Minister Khaled Touqan, Mrs. Bush saw examples of USAID and MEPI-funded education programs being implemented under the Jordan Education Initiative (JEI). In a second grade class, the First Lady saw the children learning math via computer software developed through the Jordan Education Initiative. Computer students told Mrs. Bush about distance-learning programs designed by U.S. software designers, which enable students and their teachers to conduct web conferences. Mrs. Bush and Queen Rania discussed the software's potential to improve education in rural areas by allowing students access to better-trained teachers in the cities. Mrs. Bush and the Queen also participated in an informal discussion with 14 students from INJAZ - a junior achievement-style program sponsored by USAID. In fluent English the students explained how the program had strengthened their competitiveness, effective communication, and determination to succeed.

[16. Jordan River Foundation](#)

Concluding her trip, Mrs. Bush visited the showroom of the Jordan River Foundation, an NGO founded by Queen Rania, who accompanied the First Lady. The Executive Director explained the Foundation's efforts to help women develop small businesses and to strengthen rural communities as well as prevent family violence. The First Lady saw handicrafts and spoke to rural women whom the Foundation had helped start handicraft businesses.

[17. Media Impact](#)

Both the traveling press and the local and regional media covered Mrs. Bush's visit at the WEF and Mt. Nebo and in Amman. Initial coverage in the Jordanian media included stories in all four Arabic and the English dailies. Sample Headlines: "Laura Bush affirms America's respect for religions," (Liberal Arabic Daily Al-Ghad); "Laura Bush: Finding a solution to the Middle East Problem is solving the region's most important issue," (Pro-Government Arabic Daily Ar-Rai); "Laura Bush: The Middle East is heading towards reform and change." (Pro-Government Arabic Daily Ar-Rai).

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